

Some Reflections
on the beginnings of my
Path to Allāh & by Allāh



prepared for the
All Pakistan Mashāikh Conference
honouring
Ḥazrat Khwaja Nizāmuddīn 'Awliyā'



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2007 — 1428
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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Praise be to Allāh ﷻ who, through His Eternal Word, does not cease to be praised: The Universally Merciful, The Singularly Compassionate, Who by His Mercy has stirred up in us gratitude for His Goodness, wherewith He has enriched us and inspired us to praise and glorify Him.

The limits of favour and the bounds of praise were extended when He promised to those grateful for His bounty still more blessings; and He spread wide the carpet of His Assembly to those who remember Him. He has brought into subjection all things according to His Wisdom and Equity, as He has willed, by His Power, so that by His Authority the mover remains still and the still moves. *'He is the First and the Last, The Outer and the Inner,'* (57:3) the Controller of expansion (*baṣṭ*) and contraction (*qabḍ*), *'the Knower of the Unseen (al-ghayb); not even the weight of an atom, or less than that or greater than that, either in the heavens or on the earth escapes Him.'* (34:3)

We praise Him with the praise of those who know Him with true knowledge of Him. We give thanks to Him with the expressions of gratitude of those who acknowledge the perfection of His Goodness and Favour. We bear witness that there is no deity other than Allāh alone, having no companion, with an affirmation to which no doubt is attached and before which no door closes from accepting. We testify that our liege-lord Muḥammad ﷺ is His Slave and Prophet and Messenger chosen from the mine of pure nobility, selected from a family of honour whose virtues speech falls short of describing. May Allāh bless and save him, with a blessing that will bring us to him and gather us around him on the Day of Assembly and Reckoning. May Allāh be pleased with his family, his helpers, his descendants, the people of his household, his sincere companions, the best of friends, as long as a star will shine, a new moon shall rise and a cloud shall float above the face of the earth.

رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي . وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي .
وَاحْلُلْ عُقْدَةً مِنْ لِسَانِي . يَفْقَهُوا قَوْلِي .

“My Lord. Expand my heart and make easy my task and loosen the knot from my tongue, that they may understand my speech.” (Tā Hā 20:25-28)

Towards the end of the 1427th Hijri year I was blessed to receive an invitation from Ḥaṣrat Khwaja Ghulam Qutbuddīn Faridi to come to Lahore to give a talk on the occasion of the Annual Jalsa held in honour of Ḥaṣrat Khwaja Nizamuddīn ‘Awliyā’ and Ḥaṣrat Khwaja Muḥammad Yar Faridi, Allāh sanctify their secret, who, following the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ sent by Allāh as a mercy (*rahmah*) to all humanity, sought to further his message of peace, justice, mercy and love for all.

I was offered two choices of subjects on which to speak: either on the contribution of these two great Chishtiyyah luminaries or on the subject of Taṣawwuf in general. I have chosen the second subject with special reference to my own beginnings in the Way, as my knowledge of the specific contributions of these two worthies is limited but, *‘inshāā’ Allāh*, before commencing with my talk I would like to express my very great debt to Ḥaṣrat Khawja Nizamuddin ‘Awliyā’, for it was at his Dargah in old Dehli that some forty years ago now I first encountered ‘Islāmīc Sūfism and, indeed, ‘Islām itself.

As is the case with all of Bani ‘Ādam, I was born on the *fiṭrah*, but due to the circumstances of my birth into a Christian family in America, I was raised as a Christian and had no knowledge of ‘Islām and the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ in my youth except of the most tangential and cursory nature.

I was, however, fortunate in that my grandmother and mother were extremely religious and instilled in me both a strong belief in God and a knowledge of the Prophets ﷺ based on the information available to us in the Torah, Zabūr and ‘Injil.

They also made sure that my education was at the hands of religious people rather than in the schools of materialism and secularity. This combination of belief and love of Prophetic knowledge led me, by the time I had reached my late teens to seek further afield than the boundaries of my own tradition.

At first this took the form of wide ranging readings into the various world traditions, both East and West, but, as the saying goes, “Painted cakes do not satisfy hunger”, and this led me to seek out living teachers of these different traditions.

At this time, the late 50’s and early 60’s, a number of teachers from Japan, Tibet, India, and the Middle East were coming to America sponsored mainly by the departments of Eastern Studies of various academic institutions and universities.

Functionally this meant that in order to have any direct access to these teachers, one had to be a student of the institution or else be satisfied to attend public gatherings where one sat in a large lecture hall or auditorium and listened to lectures of a general nature, with very little opportunity for any kind of personal interaction or questioning of the teacher.

This proved so unsatisfactory that, in conjunction with a few like-minded friends, I decided in 1966 to found an institution which had as one of its purposes bringing teachers from the various world traditions to come to live and teach in a less formal, more intimate environment, which included inter-personal give and take as well as experiential practice.

As a result of these programs I came into contact with two men who called themselves ‘Çhişti Sūfis’ but were really universalists trying to combine many spiritual paths into one. I did not find their teaching at all convincing but I did learn something about the history of Şūfism and the lives of the Şūfis.

The little historical knowledge I gained lead me to understand that Şūfism was deeply connected with ʾIslām but *their* teachings were entirely divorced from ʾIslām and dealt mainly with ‘spiritual practices’. What I gained from them was limited but tantalizing. Their teachings could be compared to hot house roses; beautiful, but cut off from their roots. But what I did learn inspired me to travel in 1969 to India to seek those roots.

In the course of my travels in India I was fortunate enough to visit the Dargah of Ḥaẓrat Kḥawja Nizāmuddīn ‘Awliyā’ in old Delhi where, for the first time, I came into contact with both ‘Islām and ‘Islāmic Ṣūfism.

On my third day in India I was in New Delhi spinning through the jumbled lanes of Chandni Chawq Bazaar in a horse-drawn tonga to visit what I heard was a center of ‘Islāmic spirituality.

The street that led out from the bazaar was clogged with every imaginable kind of vehicle and filled with long snaking lines and clots of people on foot. The huge bulk of the main Friday Mosque finally loomed up and just nearby, on the right, were the walls surrounding of the Dargah of Nizāmuddīn ‘Awliyā’.

I alighted from the tonga and made my way into the precincts of the *dargah*. After first visiting the marble canopied tomb accompanied by a throng of eager and very sweet men, who insisted on providing me with handfuls of incense to light and dousing me and the tomb with quantities of rose water, I was invited to sit with some of them. All of this was to the accompaniment of the most exquisite songs (which later I found out were called *qawwali*) I had ever heard being sung by a group of men sitting in a corner around an old harmonium, as well as the soft chanting of what I assumed was the Qur’ān by numerous men rocking back and forth as they read.

I sat down with the men and immediately we were brought cups of tea flavoured with rose water and other herbs. This was my first experience of Indian chai. After a few sips, prior to which they all uttered the phrase “*bismillāh*”, they plied me with questions in an archaic, almost Victorian, English.

After years of living in the Muslim world I now know that it is invariably the custom when a stranger arrives to ask, after providing tea, coffee or even just plain water, questions.

The Muslim world is vast and includes people from almost every corner of the planet. It is a world inhabited by people who love to travel and visit and talk with other people. These sessions are not meant as ‘inquisitions’ but are a way of people getting to know and understand other people as well as to learn the news of distant, and often strange, places.

I didn't know this at the time and I was, I fear, a bit nervous and thus a bit defensive. The men, on the other hand, must have sensed this as they immediately sought to put me at ease. Contrary to the picture of Muslims portrayed in the media I found them to be the most polite and generous of people.

As we were sitting, one of the men in our little circle, which was one of many in the courtyard of the *dargah*, pointed to a group of men who were involved in what appeared to me to be elaborate sets of prostrations facing a wall set with delicate vari-coloured marble mosaics of empty windows or doors.

He asked me in a kindly way what I thought they were doing.

I replied that obviously they were making prostrations which I assumed were some act of worship.

"That", he said, "is *namāz*, the worship of the Muslims."

From my readings I knew in a vague sort of way that Muslims were obliged by their religion to pray five times a day facing East. Why, I wondered, as I had an acute sense of direction, were they then facing West? I made some remark about this to my interlocutor. He then began telling me something about the *namaz* or *ṣalah*, as he said it was called in Arabic.

Whilst I could not quite follow all he was saying, I understood from what he said that they were not facing East because, in India, Makkah lay to the West. Muslims were enjoined to face Makkah when they offered their prayers, as Makkah was the very centre of the world, because it was the place where 'Ādam and Hawa ءا, when they came to earth from the Garden, first worshipped God whose proper name is Allāh ﷻ, and that later 'Ibrāhīm ؑ had come there with his first born son, 'Ismā'īl ؑ, and built a simple cube-shaped stone building for the worship of the One True God, but in time this pure worship had degenerated and the people living around the shrine had fallen, as had the people of his country, into idolatry. Many centuries later Muḥammad ﷺ had come and both purified the shrine and renewed the pure worship of 'Ibrāhīm, Ismā'īl and 'Ādam ءا. The men that he had pointed out to me were performing exactly the same practices that the first human beings — our parents — had performed when *they* worshipped Allāh.

My interlocutor then went on to explain that many generations ago his own family had been Hindus when there had come a man from Sijistan by the name of Kḥwaja Muʿinuddīn Ḥishṭī ؎ who, through his piety and example and great knowledge of both the unseen and the seen, had shown to his ancestors the original and pure way of worship. Nizāmuddīn Awliyāʾ ؎, the man buried in the *dargah*, had been a later follower of Kḥwaja Muʿinuddīn Ḥishṭī ؎, and established and taught the same way of worship and all the later teachers and masters who followed them were at one in both their belief and practice.

Watching the men at their worship I was profoundly moved by its dignity and simplicity as much, indeed, as I was by the strains of the beautiful heavenly music which I heard when we first entered the gates of the compound.

This was my first introduction to ʿIslāmīc Ṣūfism and when I returned to the States I began to study this subject more deeply.

In the course of my studies during this period I came across the writings of a group of writers and teachers all of whom claimed association with the Ṣadḥḍḥūlī school of ʿIslāmīc Ṣūfism but were of two very different outlooks.

I refer here to the writings of a group led by Fritjhof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings and Syed Hossein Nasr, who traced their lineage (*silsilah*) back to Ṣaykh Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī of Mostaganem, and another group led by ʿAbdu-l-Qadr Dallas and ʿAbdu-l-Ḥaqq Bewley, who traced their lineage back to Ṣaykh ʿIbnu-l-Ḥabīb of Meknes in Morocco; both, in turn, traced their lineage to Ṣaykh ad-Darqawī of North Africa.

Another writer, Prof. H. Corbin, who though not an outwardly professed Muslim, had studied first in Turkey and then extensively in Iran with the scholar as-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn at-Tabatabaʾi, also affected me very deeply at this time principally through his magisterial work, *L'Homme de lumiere dans le Soufisme Iranien*. When I began to synthesize the ideas and understanding expressed in that and other works of his with the writings of Schoun in his book, *Understanding Islam*, and ʿAbdu-l-Qadr Dallas' books, *The Book of Strangers* and *The Way of Muhammad*, certain things became clearer for me.

Understanding Islam brought me to a sharper awareness of the relations between, as Schuon says, “man as such and God as such”, of the pressing, indeed essential, need both for tradition and orthodoxy as well as the intimate subtle relationship which existed between the exoteric and the esoteric.

L’homme de lumière opened out the meaning and secret of the supra-sensory personal guide corresponding to the figure of light who is the invisible guide, the heavenly partner, the angel of one’s being who is neither shadow nor double, but the True Self who is both image and mirror: the inner guide or ʿImām.

The Book of Strangers and the author’s later work, *The Way of Muhammad*, made clear, from quite another perspective, the concomitant necessity for an earthly human guide based on the understanding that who does not have a guide (*shaykh*), who had himself traversed the path and was firmly linked to a true and authentic salvific source that had been thoroughly tested in, through, and over time, inevitably has *shayṭān* as a guide.

It became clear to me that the salvific means for this time is ʿIslām and that necessarily the guide had to be Muslim at every level of his being and life. Such a guide was both the complete practitioner of the means and had the capacity of transmitting that Way to the seeker and had students at various stages who were manifestations at different levels of the efficacy of the means employed by the *Shaykh*. The author was unambiguous in confirming that the Way of Sūfism lay through absolute unconditional surrender (*ʿislām*) to Allāh and following His Last and Final Prophet, Muḥammad ﷺ. This conclusion in turn fitted very neatly with what I was able to comprehend, given the density of the text, from my readings in *Understanding Islam*, which stressed tradition and orthodoxy as necessary correlates and essential prerequisites on the path to Allah ﷻ.

Indeed, if I understood these different authors at least partly correctly, they each pointed, again from very different vectors and for perhaps very differing reasons, and certainly with a very different understanding, to ʿIslām as the *only* possible and efficacious means of salvation in the present age and, as such, the culmination and essence of all prior Revelations received by humanity from then to now — from the past to the present.

L'homme de lumiere, which dealt with more subtle realms and which came to me filtered through my imperfect French, was something else again and demanded very careful reading and a very deep consideration of what lay behind the text.

What was clear, and very important to my understanding, was that in almost all cases the definitive language used by the author when he sought absolute precision in delineating the most subtle of spiritual or metaphysical perceptions was, with the exception of some use of Greek and Latin, Arabic.

Henri Corbin also was able to clarify to me for the first time a number of important time/space constructs which allowed me to maintain certain levels or degrees simultaneously without making the mistake of confusing them one for the other.

He explained that there is an horizontal, historical or gross time (*zamānu-l-kathif*) in which, for instance, the Prophet Mūsa ﷺ, (Moses) is engaged in dialogue with the Pharaoh of his time. At another level of time which may be termed trans-historical or subtle time (*zamānu-l-laṭīf*), this can be understood as an eternal re-current discussion between two principles whom we refer to under the rubric of Mūsa ﷺ and Pharaoh.

At still another time, which is heiro-historical or sacred subtle time (*zamānu-l-ʿalṭaf*), this discussion is actually taking place theophanically in the form of an epiphany (*tajalliyah*), according to my own ability to both realise and actualise this experience, in the inward time world of my soul (*zamanu-l-ʿanfūsi*), in precisely the present moment between the Mūsa ﷺ and the Pharaoh who are, in reality, two parts of my own self.

The implication of such an understanding in terms of the exegesis of Revelation is of immeasurable value. By the means of this understanding, Revelation is not something received in the past but something to be realised in the present.

From this perspective I was able to understand for the first time that the Old Testament, the New Testament and The Final Testament (Qurʾān), exist simultaneously in innumerable scintillating variables of dimensions and time lines. But, remarkably, and providentially, no one dimension can annul or cancel any other dimension. In short, everything fits perfectly.

Thus seen Revelation is neither mythology nor is it allegory. On the contrary, Revelation is an account of the most piercing reality and has its particular perspective as well as its perfectly proportional weight in the history of the soul as well as in the history of the world and in the world of principles.

The important thing was to be able to keep all the perspectives in sight according to their degree and maintain them in their proper proportional relationship in order that one not fall into making unwarranted assumptions based on a confusion or adulteration of differing or varying levels and degrees.

What became clear, if admittedly in a rather inchoate manner, in that period might be summed up as follows:

- 1) The necessity of orthodoxy and tradition.
- 2) The necessity for an internal connection to the Real.
- 3) The necessity for a living guide who followed an orthodox way, was firmly integrated within the tradition of that way, was himself connected to the Real and was capable of transmission.
- 4) The necessity for a language capable of explicating and communicating subtle spiritual and metaphysical truth.
- 5) The multi-dimensional reality of Revelation and its acute importance on the level of the self, history, and principle.



With these considerations in mind and heart, three years after my visit to the Dargah of Ḥaṣrat Kḥwaja Nizamuddin ʿAwliyaʿ, I was again inspired to travel and this time I went to al-Quds (Jerusalem) in Occupied Palestine, where I was blessed to be able to continue my studies in ʿIslāmīc Ṣūfism with a number of inspired teachers, and within a few months I found myself embracing ʿIslām in the precincts of the Masjīd al-ʿAqṣa.

Before writing more about these teachers and their teachings I would like to relate a very important experience which, along with my visit to the Dargah of Ḥaṣrat Kḥwaja Nizamuddin ʿAwliyaʿ, had a very direct bearing on my embracing ʿIslām.

One day just before the month of fasting or Ramaḍān, I was sitting in the garden of the house I had rented on the Mount of Olives taking the late afternoon sun when my landlord, Sayyid

‘Abid, who always came in the late afternoon to water the garden, asked me if I would like to take lunch with him on the following day as, since Ramaḍān was coming, we would not have the opportunity and he had wanted to have me for lunch and meet with me since we first moved in.

I replied, very much in the custom of the land and also because by then I was beginning to pick up a little Arabic, that I would be honoured to be his guest. Between his little English and my little Arabic he made it known that I need not bring a translator, as his youngest son spoke at least school-boy English and we would be able to understand each other that way.

The next day at around three o’clock I showed up at his house, which was further up the Mount of Olives (*Jabal Zaytūn*) where it turned the corner to the place that marked the Ascension of Jesus ~~✝~~, and where there was a small mosque on the very prow of the Mount that always drew my attention as it always seemed to radiate a certain tranquil light.

I came to the door, which was set in a long grey stone wall and after knocking, and being vetted through the little window set in the door, I was admitted by a young boy who proceeded to take me up a long internal alleyway which I noted was immaculately clean despite there being walled pens on either side which obviously contained different kinds of livestock and birds. Marvelling at the size and subtle intricacy of the house, we continued up this passage past a number of closed doors and emerged in a courtyard set with beautiful tiles and bordered with clearly very well tended and very healthy plants. In one corner of the courtyard two palms grew which provided shade and, no doubt, dates in season. Just off this courtyard was a somewhat formal salon which obviously served to accommodate guests, as around the three closed sides were ranged many chairs and sofa-like benches. Here the young boy, in a very polite manner, bade me be seated to await his father.

After some minutes had passed in which I was brought coffee and a glass of clear cold water on a shiny brass tray, I heard the sound of feet coming up the passageway and my landlord appeared along with an older son in the space of the courtyard.

He was covered in cement dust, for he had a day job working on a building site in the New City. He greeted me at a distance and gestured for his son to come to me. His son told me his father had just come from work and as soon as he had washed and made his prayer he would join me and then we would eat shortly thereafter, °*inshāa* °*Allāh*.

He then took my leave and disappeared across the court and down the passageway. Set in one of the tiled walls bordered by the plants was a tap and it was to this tap that my landlord took himself. I had, in my visits to the Sacred Precincts (*Haram Sharīf*) in which al-°Aqṣā was located, many times noted men making their ablutions prior to their prayer, but I had never had the opportunity to observe this ritual so singularly and without the feeling that I was spying or gawking.

Rolling up his sleeves and his cuffs and opening the tap he proceeded first to wash his hands right and left, then his mouth and nose and face and then his forearms right and left and then his head and neck and then his feet right and left. As he was doing this I saw, or it seemed to me, as he stood under the light of the sun which filtered down through the palms, that each drop of water was like a refracted jewel or a drop of light. Thus when he wiped over his head with the water, his hair, usually hidden beneath his black and white chequered *kaffiyah*, was crowned with a diadem of diamonds and every time he dipped into the water he sprinkled the most amazing jewels of pure light which fell on the plants to either side of the tap.

Just as he was finishing the young boy returned with a whisk broom, a towel and two small rugs. Handing his father the towel he then proceeded to whisk the remaining dust off his father's jacket and then laid out the two rugs with one slightly ahead of the other. He then made the call to prayer and, with his father leading, entered into the movements of the prayer.

They stood erect on their rugs in the brilliant light of the courtyard and I saw, really for the very first time, the whole of the *ṣalah* (prayer) completely performed.

Standing, bowing, prostrating, kneeling. Rising and falling. I marvelled at the whole of it. It was perfect; complete.

I marvelled even more how this act transformed my landlord and his son. As they stood I saw them as the perfect representatives of human beings before God and as they bowed I saw them as the submissive servants and as they prostrated as the perfect slaves and as they knelt as the perfected worshippers. I was utterly moved at that moment and equally I knew at that moment that this was the best and most perfect action I had ever seen in all my travels across the world. I also knew at that moment that I must become a Muslim as this was clearly *the Way*. How I would become a Muslim I didn't know but I knew that whatever action this was that could so transform, so ennoble, so truly dignify two ordinary people and restore them to their true being, lift them completely out of the realm of the mundane, was what I both needed and had so avidly sought. It was a complete form of perfection existing on the earth and it was obviously something that had come down from the realms of perfection; a completely and wholly Providential provision.

I contrasted in my mind my own father's return from work and how I greeted him. I contrasted in my mind the many working men I had known in my own life as a builder and how, tired and beat, they would come home usually to a beer and the newspaper or to turn on the TV and ask, "What's for dinner?"

I saw this completely ordinary man and his schoolboy son absolutely transfigured and transmuted by this utterly simple and yet terribly profound ritual. Tears formed in my heart that I had never had anything like this with my own father. That we had completely missed the real boat because there was no doubt in my mind or in my heart that this was the real boat. That he and I had never stood under the palms in our courtyard as father and son before God in perfect obedience and reverence and I wept hot tears.

I barely trusted myself to speak when, after giving peace (*salām*) to their right and their left, they came to join me in the room in which I now rather awkwardly sat on my chair.

My host, Sayyid 'Abid, now came to greet me with the traditional greeting of *Ahlan wa sahlān*, which means something like 'You are among kin and at ease'. He apologised for being late, saying that he usually got home earlier and would

have liked to be able to greet me at the door, but there had been some disturbance around the Old City and he was forced on his way home to pass through three checkpoints on his way out of West Jerusalem where he was working on a construction site, and he hoped that his son, Aḥmad, had received me and made me comfortable in his own unexpected absence.

I replied that he most certainly had and thanked him for both his concern and the delicious cardamom coffee that his son had brought. Sayyid ‘Abid then indicated the tap which had so recently produced the amazing diamonds and indicated that if I would like to wash up we would have our meal.

When I returned from washing I found a small and low round table had been set in the guest room and rugs had been spread for us to sit upon. The food was truly delicious and consisted of rice and lamb with sweet roasted pine nuts and raisins. It was served on a round tray into which Abid and Aḥmad and I dug with spoons. Now and then Sayyid ‘Abid would tear into the steaming lamb with his fingers and offer me choice titbits with complete graciousness and politeness.

After we had finished eating and once again washed at what I considered to be the ‘miraculous fountain’ we took coffee at the table and, through Aḥmad, he asked me about myself and I related somewhat of my story and in turn asked him his.

He said he had a number of sons and daughters. Aḥmad was his youngest though, he said, “*in shāā ’Allāh*, God willing, I will have another.” He was, I guessed, then in his mid fifties.

I asked him, gently, why he still worked when he had many sons and he replied that it was necessary for him to work not only because he was the head of the house and so responsible, but also he had worked all of his life and couldn’t see any reason to stop now. His sons, one of whom was working in Saudia, another in the Emirates and yet another in Detroit, all sent money home but he was saving this money for them as they would be sure to need it when they married and, in the case of the oldest who was already married, for some emergency or another for such is the life. Some of their remittances, he said I thought a bit shyly, they sent directly to their

mother, his wife, to provide for the furniture their unmarried sisters would need in time to furnish their own houses.

When I asked him about his family he said that they had been living here — and he pointed to the ground upon which we were sitting at that moment — for over three thousand years.

As I understood him to say thru Aḥmad, in the distant past his family had been from one of the tribes of Bani Israel and after the coming of ‘Isā bin Maryam ﷺ, (Jesus, son of Mary), they became Christians and, a generation or so after the Kḥalifah ‘Umar ؓ had come to the Holy Land, they had all embraced ‘Islām and they had, *alḥamdulillāh*, been Muslims ever since.

Pointing again to the ground on which we sat he said, “*This* is my Holy Land (*al-arḍu-l-muqadasah*) and my intention is to remain here living upon it and I pray that Aḥmad and others of my sons and daughters will live here after me and my family will go on, as we have always, living on this Holy Land.”

We talked on over the fruit and another round of coffee served in tiny thimble-like cups came and went. He then asked me if I would like to rest a while. His father was coming this evening and he would like very much if I would stay and meet him as his father spoke passable English, having served in some capacity (I didn’t quite get what capacity) when the English had occupied the Holy Land, and he enjoyed speaking English though he didn’t have much opportunity any more.

I said I would be honoured and thanked him whereupon Aḥmad, who had been translating, showed me into a little room just off the large room in which we had eaten which was equipped with a bed and some quilts. It too was immaculate and I lay upon the bed completely at rest looking out a little window set high in the wall in which I could see the top of the palm tree and watched the day pass into evening and heard the call to prayer from the small mosque that I so loved just around the curve in the road from the home of my host.

“How perfect.”, I thought lying on the bed in the little guest room, “How civilised these people are. They really have it all together. Work. Pray. Eat. Rest. Converse. Everything in its right time and in its perfect place.”

My own world seemed coarse and jumbled in its agitation brought about by constant movement and change. I didn't know it then but I was slowly making my way into the traditional world and I was also slowly entering into the world of 'Islām. I had that day taken a major step simply in the realisation of the inevitability of my trajectory.

I write this because I would hope that the reader would understand that whilst books and teachers played a very important part in my embarking 'Islām and entering the path of Šūfism, in a very real sense it is the personal good example, the *uswah hasanah*, of ordinary Muslim people, since it they who are the proof, that was far more convincing than the books I read and the teachers I met on my way both to 'Islām and the Šūfi Path.

To continue; among the teachers that I *did* come into contact with during my stay in the Holy Land, certain of them were able, again through their being and example more than anything they actually said, to help me advance on this Way.

Šaykh 'Abdu-l Muṭṭalib ash-Sharīf, who I simply called 'the Grandfather', dwelt in the city of al-Khalil which is where the Prophets, 'Ibrāhīm and 'Ishāq ﷺ have their resting place. It was he who crucial to my accepting 'Islām and really becoming, I pray, a 'Šūfi. When I met him he was over a hundred.

His *zāwiya* (teaching center) was near the Masjid of 'Ibrāhīm ﷺ and was located in an old section of the souk or bazaar. One reached the *zawīya* by gradually making one's way uphill past stalls containing foodstuffs and then various types of clothing and knitted head gear and then through the leather and rubber, mainly re-cycled tyres in the form of different types of carrying baskets and buckets, all the while climbing higher though there was no view out as the houses and shops hemmed us in and now and then even the sky above disappeared as a result of the *ṣabat*, which are second storey rooms bridging two buildings on opposite sides of the alley, which often span and cover the narrow alleyways and streets.

When I would go to visit the Grandfather I usually went in the company of his grandson, Ḥasan as-Šaghīr, who worked as a translator for pilgrims to the Old City and the Holy sites.

I could barely sense how he took us, so many times did we turn and twist on our own tracks. After a lot of climbing we would finally come out into a *bat^hha* which is a small public square formed by the Y shaped junction where three streets converged. Taking the main branch of the Y, Hasan would lead me higher into a brighter more open street that was bounded on either sides by high walls rather than buildings.

At last we arrived at the ubiquitous green gate set into a length of anonymous wall and here Hasan knocked.

Seemingly from a well came a faraway and somewhat muffled answer, followed by footsteps and in a few minutes by the tiny eye door in the gate being opened. Reassured by the presence of Hasan someone opened one of the doors or leaves of the gate from within and we were free to enter.

It was like entering one of the line drawings of buildings with strange perspectives of E. M. Escher. The street level was actually the roof and instead of climbing upstairs we began descending to a courtyard which was three floors down. Each floor was filled with rooms which opened on the courtyard and a balcony or veranda ran round the square or hollow core.

On these balconies or verandas which ran around each level of the well of the courtyard were tens maybe hundreds of 5 gallon tins which formally contained olives or olive oil and still bore the colourful logos of the sellers, some obviously dating back to another time the way old labels on fruit crates from southern California reveal the era in which they were printed.

Each of these tins was filled with earth and from this earth grew the most amazing and beautiful garden filled with vegetables, small dwarf fruit trees, and a huge variety of flowers ranging from brilliant bougainvillea which hung down the well of the courtyard to delicately scented jasmine to artfully arranged massed tubs of roses. All that grew within the *zawiya* was obviously tended to with great care and, more importantly, with great skill as everything was producing and producing abundantly. It was a veritable hanging garden and one which obviously provided more than its share of food and beauty for those who lived, worshipped and learned within the *zāwiya*.

The courtyard at the bottom of this hanging garden was maybe some thirty feet in each direction from the centre and was roughly square but very roughly as its geometry was very deceptive, as it was more five sided than four sided. One side was obviously a room which served as a kitchen, then there was another side which contained what might have been, (I never asked and nobody ever said), living quarters, and then another side gave off into a small masjid or *muṣāllah* (oratory) separated into a men's side and a woman's side by a large green and cordovan leather curtain. This *muṣāllah* appeared to be built into the side of a hill. This is what I mean when I say the geometry was very subtle and deceptive, for not only was there a 'built' part of the courtyard structure but there was another part which was cut or tunnelled into the living rock of the hillside which we had been climbing. Indeed there was an actual tunnel through the hill at one point which emerged into another, seemingly smaller, courtyard which appeared as a pool of light at the end of a tunnel.

In this far courtyard there were a number of tombs which Ḥasan told me were those of his immediate ancestors who had come from the Maghrib for Ḥajj centuries before, and after visiting al-Quds, settled in al-Khalīl. One of the tombs was for his grandfather whose habit was to sleep one night in his tomb and one night with his wife in a room deep in the *zāwiya*.

The Shaykh was in the *zāwiya muṣalla* and it was to there we made our way only to be greeted by him standing in the glassed door. He was obviously quite old and obviously yet still quite strong. He was dressed traditionally and wore the red and white *ʿimmah* (turban) of a scholar. His beard was white and closely cropped and though his eyes were blind their corners were creased by a lifetime of smiles judging from the one on his face which was radiant and deeply peaceful.

He greeted us with *salām* and raised his right hand and passed it over our faces one by one as some times blind people do in order to 'see' the person with whom they are 'faced'.

It was still sometime before the *ʿaṣr* or afternoon ṣalāh and the Shaykh invited us to sit with him in the *muṣalla* whilst waiting for the time of the *ʿaṣr* to come in.

Tea was brought first by his wife, who was herself ancient and bent, and then by a younger man who was obviously one of his students (*murīdūn*) and we sat quietly in the *muṣalla* at the bottom of the well with our backs to the qiblah wall looking out into the well which was a patchwork of light and shade and the reflected colours of the flowers and fruits which filled and spilled down from its many levels. This was a place of deep, deep peace and the Ṣhaykh was obviously a man who had reached a level of being that I could only imagine and certainly had never even touched in my own life.

As we sat we could hear and then see, one by one, his students as they came to the gate above and then came down the steps one after the other. As he was amazing so they were amazing and as he was ordinary in his amazingness so they were so — ordinary and yet so — blessed.

It was a tale of the tinker, the tailor, the baker and the candlestick maker. It was a progression and a procession of many of the men we had passed on our way through the souk. I learned later they when the time of *‘aṣr* drew near they threw cloths over their goods and wares in the case of the stall keepers or closed up their shops in the case of those artisans who had small manufactory shops and made their way to the *zāwiya* daily at this time. Additionally there were a few among those who had gathered, who were obviously professional men — doctors or school teachers from their looks and appearance.

We first heard the call for the *‘aṣr* coming from the Masjid of Sayyidinā ʾIbrāhīm ﷺ and then one of the men went out into the courtyard and began to make the call there.

Following the call we formed into lines to pray the *‘aṣr* behind the Ṣhaykh. Everything was completely natural and absolutely normal. This was the way it was and this is how life really is.

After the the ṣalah when the salām had been passed to the right and the left, a circle was formed with the ṣhaykh sitting in the rounded space of the *qiblah* and the men altogether in unison with the Ṣhaykh began the recital of *subḥanullāh wa-l-ḥamduli-llāh wa allāhu ʾakbar*’s that follow all the cycles of the ṣalah. But the recital did not stop there.

With those completed they launched into a number of Qurʾānic passages followed by some supplications (*duʿāʾ*) and then the recital of what I afterwards learned was called the Litany or Orison of the Sea (*hizbu-l-bahr*) received and composed by the founder of this order, Shaykh Abu-l-Ḥasan aṣḥ-Shādhḍhulī رضي الله عنه.

When this recitation came to an end the Shaykh began to speak and he spoke with great love and sincerity. I could not follow him at all but Ḥasan put the words of the day's lesson in my ear. He also told me that each day after the ʿaṣr prayer these same men gathered here and also on Thursday and Sunday nights when more would come from al-Khalīl. They had been doing this for decades, and the students of the Shaykh were numerous in time but seldom more at any one time than a circle of about thirty to forty in number with the exception of major festivals (*mawālid* or *mawāsim*) or on the two big holy days (*ʿīdayn*) when the *zāwiya* was filled to overflowing.

What impressed me about the lesson (*dars*) of the Shaykh was his ability to personalise it so that he spoke directly, almost intimately, with one after an other of the men. Coupled with this was the care he took with each one of the men and the obvious knowledge that he had of each of them which allowed him to particularise and personalise his teaching.

At the same time that the lesson was being directed to one or an other of the men in the circle, the underpinnings of the lesson were broad and universal, thus allowing all those listening to draw from the lesson even though the Shaykh was only addressing one or another of his students directly.

The fact that he was 'blind' played no part in the transaction at all. He obviously could see quite well even if his organ of sight seemed to be the heart rather than his physical eyes. In fact I learned that it was only in the last twenty or so years that the Shaykh had gradually lost his sight and until then he had been known for his keen vision.

Sitting in that circle I felt that I had finally stumbled on or arrived at the heart of the traditional world and that this all had been going on not for the lifetime of this one Shaykh but this is what had always been going on from the beginning of time.

This was the not only how the transmission took place, it was the actual transmission itself. The two were not separate.

I write these little vignettes because I want the reader to understand that this Way is not something exotic, foreign or strange nor is it a Way that is from some distant past but rather it is very much alive and living in the present everywhere in the Muslim world and beyond. It is a Way that is both extremely ordinary and at the same time completely extraordinary.

Another *shaykh* I met during this same time and from whom I learned many profound lessons was Hajji Noor, a Naqshbandi *shaykh* living in the Old City.

He lived in an incredible room filled with piles and piles of books, magazines and old newspapers and lit by a single very bright high wattage unshielded bulb hanging by a cord from the domed ceiling of his room deep within one of the oldest parts of the City. This struck me as quite odd given that he too was blind, but was cleared up when his son, who translated for me, explained that his father had been an omnivorous reader in the years before he had gone blind, and that out of habit he still turned the light on every night though he himself could no longer see the light but rather felt the warmth which came *from* the light. This explained, I guessed, why it was of such a high wattage. One other thing that was odd was a huge wheel of the type used to grind and sharpen knives which was in a corner of the room. That too was explained. Hājji Noor was, it seemed, a knife sharpener by trade; a blind knife sharpener.

He had travelled in India, among other places, and had visited the Chishtīyyah in Ajmer and Delhi and Fathipur Sikri. Of course most of his time had been spent among his own *tariqah* of the Naqshbandi who were also numerous in India.

The Chishtīyyah he had found to be of great interest and said that all the Muslims were indebted to them as tens of thousands of people had embraced ʿIslām through the *barakah* of Ḥaẓrāt Muʿinnudīn Chishtī, the founder of the order, when he came to India, and that his followers were also very well known as being excellent callers (*dawāʿin*) who had been responsible for bringing many people to ʿIslām.

What was so remarkable, he said, was that they had made use of the popular folk culture of the Hindus to accomplish this, especially their music, and then had gone on bring their call to the Hindu holy men, philosophers and metaphysicians.

What they had done in the first instance, he went on, was to take the popular love music of the day; the kind that stuck in people's minds, and to that music they added their own verses extolling the love of Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ.



In that way, he explained, they took something already easy for the people and simply worked the 'Islāmic message into what was already there and, most importantly, popular. They had also done the same thing with existing religious, spiritual or metaphysical concepts prevalent among the educated which they simply assimilated, absorbed and explained in 'Islāmic terms, thus making it easy for many of the deeply religious and spiritual people of India, which included a vast number of different religions, to come to 'Islām by dint of being able to see that 'Islām was capable, not only of synthesising that which had come before, but of adding to it the unitive and singular dimension of 'Islām. They also were able, by using these methods, to introduce many Arabic and Ṣūfī religious and technical terms into the everyday language of the people, thus making their teachings more accessible and less foreign.

In fact their whole genius, as he saw it, was this ability to work within what people already accepted and simply enlarge and expand upon it step by step.

One night when I went to visit him I asked him to speak about some of the practices of the Naqshbandī and specifically about the silent recollection or *adh-dhikru-l-jahri*. He told me,

“This means of recollection or remembrance (*adh-dhikr*) was transmitted by the first Kḫalifah, Abū Bakr ؓ, who received it from the Prophet ﷺ, on the second day of the Hijra when having left Makkah for Madinah, Allāh preserve it, they took refuge in the Cave of Ṭḥawr from the pursuit of the Makkans.

“In order not to alert their pursuers to their presence in the cave they made dhikr together, but not audibly, even though their tongues (and their hearts within) moved with the dhikr.

“Since we Naqshbandī trace our line back to Abu Bakr  and from him to the source of all the lines (*salāsil*), the Prophet  we have continued their practice into our present.

“We regard the *dhikr* which is made aloud (*adh-dhikru-l-lisān*) to be the *dhikr* of novices. Its efficacy is that it rids one of impurities and preoccupation or fascination with the world (*ad-dunya*) and the acquisition of the worldly baubles of fame and fortune. This purification (*tazkiyah*) can be achieved through strong and forceful vocal remembrance by the use of one or both of the phrases contained in the *shahadah*:

lāā ʾilāha ʾillā-llāh
muḥammadu-r-rasūlu-llāh

“At a later stage, when the novice has progressed in purity, it is no longer necessary or even efficacious to continue with this loud and forceful vocal *dhikr*. It is at this point, in accord with the knowledge of the seeker by his *shaykh*, that the inaudible *dhikr* is prescribed.

“We say that the audible *dhikr* is no longer efficacious beyond a certain point since it tends to inflame the *nafs* and can lead to a form of posturing which casts a shadow on true sincerity. It also has a tendency to dissipate the subtle breath at a point when control of the breath is of great importance

“Silent *dhikr* leads to the opening of the door of the unseen, (*fathu-l-bābu-l-ghayb*) and through the lack of outer sound and gradual internalisation enables the inner senses to develop. Through the silent *dhikr* one gradually loses awareness of both the act and the actor who is none other than one’s own self and gradually attains knowledge of the Author, whereby one is granted to attain the reality of truth of certainty. At this point the authority of the *dhikr* overwhelms the clay of the body so that the clay vanishes from one’s clayness and the light of true *dhikr* penetrates all parts of the remembrancer’s body.

“We would say therefore that the audible *dhikr* helps to destroy the outer idols of disbelief whereas the silent *dhikr* helps the seeker to transcend the subtle and far more pernicious inner idols and so move into the realms of truth and certainty.

“At this point having moved beyond the realm of the ten-thousand things, and firmly anchored by the credal profession:

lāh ʾilāha ʾillā-llāh
muḥammadu-r-rasūlu-llāh

one enters into the realm of Sovereignty (*al-malakūt*) and, in accordance to the knowledge and insight of one’s preceptor, one is assigned the dhikr of the Divine Name:

Allāh

“In the realm of Sovereignty — which is the realm of the absence of plurality — there is no further need to negate the ten-thousand outer and inner deities. In time or by grace of the All High one moves from the realm of Sovereignty to the realm of Omnipotence (*al-jabarūt*). At this stage one receives and is granted the essence (*adh-dhāt*) of the Name:

Hūū

in accord with the saying of Allāh, the Exalted, the Sublime

“Qul huwa-llāhu ʿaḥad”
Say — hūū — Allāh is One
(112:1)

“There is a stage beyond this which is the realm of Divinity (*lahūt*) itself — the ipseity — the *dhāt* — in which the True Name of Sublimity dawns in the pure heart of the seeker. This Name is called the Supreme Name (*al-ismu-ʿadhīm*) but so exalted, so sublime is this Name that it could not even be pronounced, much less heard, in the realm of humanity (*nasūt*) in which I am speaking with you. Beyond this I refuse to, and cannot, speak and Allāh knows best.”

This is just a brief sample of the words that would regularly come out of this man with Tartar eyes sitting cross-legged on his simple bed in the blinding glare of the 250 watt unshaded bulb surrounded by his many heaps and, in the corner — the wheel upon which, for most of his life, he sharpened knives.

If you were to see him at his work on a corner of the Old City you would never even guess what you were looking at. In this way Allāh ﷻ has hidden the friends (*ʿawliyāʾ*) and veiled them in His Providential Mercy and Kindness (*lutf*).

This hiddenness, this invisibility, this utter transparency, this too is part of the teaching of the Way.

As Shāykh Abu'l Hasan aṣḥ-Shādhḍhulī ﷺ said, “He who knows doesn't show and he who shows doesn't know.”

He said, with reference to those who are in the world yet not of it, “They (*al-mukḥliṣūn*) are those whom Allāh has created for the beauty of slavery to Him, the beauty of worshipping Him, and the beauty of contemplating Him. Of those who worship Him in perfect slavery and adoration, they are the most highly favoured due to their sincerity in the declaration of the oneness of His Lordship and for following His Law, in so far as He endowed their inner beings with the illuminations of His Presence, whose spirits (*arwāḥ*) He has provided with the inner meanings of His mystical sciences and with the peculiar manifestation of His concern (*ʿināyah*) and whose minds He has caused to contemplate the beneficence of His Greatness, whose souls (*nufūs*) He has purified, guarded and made to emerge from the darkness of ignorance, whom He has guided by the stars of knowledge (*ʿilm*) and the sun of spiritual knowledge (*maʿrifah*) of Him, whose beliefs He has confirmed by the proofs (*barāhīn*) of His Book and Sunnah, whose resolves (*ʿazāʾim*) He has wiped away through the realization of His over-powering desire (*mashīʾah*), whose will (*irādah*) He has reduced by giving them knowledge of His Will, whom He has made beautiful with the adornments of asceticism (*zuhd*), the ornaments of trust (*tawakkul*), the nobility of scrupulousness (*waraʿ*), the light of sure knowledge and luster of gnosis (*maʿrifah*), whom He has guided by inspiration to His Bounty and abundance (*ṭawl*), whom He has drawn near to Him so that with Him they are made to dispense with other than Him.

“Some of them He has appointed to be keys for the hearts of men and springs of the greatest wisdom of which they learn according to the divine law which they communicate secretly and openly to those who are capable. Some of them the decrees (*aqdār*) have concealed and veiled from others in order that they alone may become the masters of the truth of the hidden mysteries. They are not at all to be recognized by any distinguishing marks for they are the truly distinguished.

“In their inner self they are with The Truth (*al-haqq*) while in their outer selves they are with the creatures (*al-khālaq*). They are they and not they. They are in the realm of being (*wujūd*) characterized by their absence (*fanāʾ*). They appear to walk in ranks yet in their journeys they take separate roads. Outwardly they are poor; inwardly they are rich.

“They have assumed the virtues (*ʿaḥlāq*) of their Prophet ﷺ, as the Most High says, ‘*He found you destitute and enriched (you)*’ (93:8). Do you imagine that He enriched the Messenger ﷺ with worldly goods? Quite to the contrary.

“The sacred precincts of the Kaʿbah distressed his heart and he nourished his uneasiness from a measure. He departed from Makkah, mounted Burāq and in al-Quds ascended to the highest heaven, to the Lote tree of the uttermost limit (*sidrat al-muntahā*). He saw what he saw ‘*and the heart did not lie about what it saw*’ (53:11). Consider the state of the truly wealthy in two aspects (material and spiritual) and witness the nobility of their qualities in two states (poverty and wealth).

“If you say, ‘They are only human beings’, I will say, ‘Yes, but not like human beings; as you say of the ruby only a stone but unlike a stone’. Among these slaves was a Messenger and a Prophet ﷺ who summoned to the Truth by the Truth and the awliyāʾ ﷺ were given from Him a heritage of the Prophets ﷺ of old since they are a people who began by imitating him ﷺ with earnestness and steadfastness.

“They believed in the saying, ‘*He is Allāh and there is no thing with Him; He is now existing as He always has been.*’

“They have taken their places in the station of Unity (*tawḥīd*) after having acquired a firm footing in detachment (*tajrīd*) from the pleasures of the lower self (*ḥudḥūdḥ an-nafs*) and from consideration of such pleasures and in following the example of those who have gone before. This is the goal of the Folk and a fundamental principle in sincerity (*ʿikhlāṣ*) and in attaining to the degree of the elite (*takḥṣiṣ*). How amazing if you were to look into the real nature of their humility and poverty which is the very essence of their dignity and wealth with their Master.

“To have a real experience of this state is difficult except for a *walī* at the last stage or a trustworthy one (*ṣādq*) though he be at the beginning. For the utmost limits of the *ʿawliyāʾ* are only the beginning of the *ṣiddiqīn*.”

On another occasion he was speaking of the disappeared or transparent quality of the elite and said, “It is the Way chosen for the Lovers (*maḥbūbūn*), substitutes (*abdāl*) for the Prophets ﷺ, and of that which is accorded any one of them beyond this no person can describe a single particle. Praise be to Allāh for His Favour and benediction and abundant peace be upon Sayyidīnā Muḥammad ﷺ, the Seal of all His Prophets ﷺ.”



Among the other *shuyukḥ* that I had the opportunity to study with during my stay in the Holy Land was Shaykh Muḥammad al-Jamal who, when I first met him, was a judge (*qadī*) in the Shariʿa court on Ṣalaḥu-d-dīn Street in East Jerusalem.

I first met him at the bus stop on the Mount of Olives.

When I decided that I wanted to travel to the Holy Land I had to have some ‘reason’ to be there and some way to earn my living. Among the things I ‘did’ in life was to edit and produce books and I had come up with an idea to produce a book of interviews with the people of the Old City as a way to pay for my travel and my stay in the Holy Land. In order to do this I was working with a team of people, some of whom took pictures, others of whom translated and others of whom dealt with the logistics which made it all possible.

Almost every morning I saw this Judge at the bus stop and we continued to nod at one another by way of greeting. He was, however, in his long black robe (*jubah*) and formal red and white turban, much too formidable to approach easily. One morning however I was feeling in a particularly light mood and somehow it felt like the Judge shared my mood.

For some reason I did not take my usual seat at the back of the bus, and, instead, found myself sitting across the aisle from him. He looked at me and I looked at him and for the first time he smiled at me.

Pointing first to his beard and then to mine which was similar, at least in colouring (red) and general appearance, he laughed, or perhaps chuckled is a better description, and held up his index finger to indicate — what? That our beards were the same colour or shape or that it was all one or that God is One. I did not know then and I still do not know now.

In any case it did break the ice.

I asked Elias, who was acting as my translator that day, if he could, in a few brief words, tell the Judge what we were doing and ask him if I might make an interview with him.

He readily agreed and, through Elias, gave me instructions to his house, which, it turned out, was only ten minutes by foot from ours, and told me to come that evening after the time of the night prayers had passed. I thanked him, through Elias, and told him that he might expect me that evening.

“*In shāā ʿAllāh* we see what Allāh, He makes.” he replied.

The same light mood continued all through the day and I found myself in a state of great expectation and looking forward very much to the evening though, in truth, still a little bit anxious and apprehensive as the Judge still seemed rather formidable.

That night I waited until after the call to prayer had stopped echoing off the terraces of the Mount and, giving him time to pray, I then made my way to his house with Elias.

His house, unlike ours which looked to the south, looked east. It was modest and built of the same golden stone from which everything local was constructed. I made my way up a set of stairs, for it was located on a rather steep part of the hill, and knocked. A young boy answered our knock and Elias told him we were here to see his father, at which we were admitted.

The young boy ushered us into a room at the very front of the house which I had learned was called the *salāmlīk* where the guests are received. It was by this time late October and the nights were turning cold. I found the Judge sitting with his legs tucked up under him on a couch dressed in a simple white wool robe (*thawb*) and knit cap, puffing on a water pipe and drinking tea with sweet sage (*maryamiyah*) in it.

He motioned us to some nearby chairs and I got busy setting up the tape recorder and he asked his son to bring us some of the same tea with the *maryamiyyah* that grows wild on the hills of Moab which I had come to, and continue to, love. Then he got himself settled and after the tea arrived we began to talk.


The interview was a total washout and waste of time.

He began by telling us his name was Ṣhaykh Muhammad ar-Rifai al-Jamal and that he served as a Judge in the *Ṣharīʿah* Court and, after that, not much more than that.

I asked him the usual questions that we had all agreed on and which we asked everyone we interviewed and got absolutely nowhere. I did get some answers but they were either generalities or extremely formal ones that told me absolutely nothing about him, what he thought or, more importantly, what he felt.

I shifted a bit and began improvising questions along more general topics and got the same non-committal response.

By that point I was usually able to sense the drift of an interview but now I drew a blank. I neither knew where it was going or what, in truth, we were talking about. I decided to give up and, after thanking him for his time, we left.

Elias and I walked back up the hill and came to the cross roads that led west over the top of the hill past the Mosque of Salmān Fārsī  to the bus stop and, in my case, south along the ridge to our house which backed on the Garden of Gesthemene. I thanked Elias and told him I was sorry for bringing him out at night for I knew by then that it was difficult for Palestinians to move around at night because of the snap checks which were often run by the Israeli military or the queues at police checkpoints where he would have to show his identity card and go through various hassles. He didn't seem too concerned though as he was staying at the house of a relative in the Christian section of the Old City and it was still pretty early. After briefly discussing our next day's work we took each others' leave and I proceeded on alone down the ridge.

I reached home, and after having another cup of tea and went off to my room. I had, in effect, a night off as I had cut the interview short, seeing it was going nowhere.

I was just about to go up to my room on the second floor, where I had taken over an old utility kitchen as an office and sleeping room, when I heard someone banging at our gate. By now I was pretty relaxed and not at all on the paranoid edge that I had been on when we first moved to the house and I had thought our neighbours might be terrorists, when, in truth, all they really wanted was to bring us some food and make us welcome. I opened the door and walked out into the night past the jasmine bushes and, opening the little window set in the iron gate, looked out at — Shaykh Muḥammad.

I was, to say the very least, very surprised. I immediately opened the door for him, thinking that perhaps I might have left something in his house and he was returning it and at the same time realising if I had he would have sent his son and not come himself.

He spoke, as most people in al-Quds did, a few words of English and I, by then, had learned a few words of Arabic. Between our limited vocabularies he caused me to understand in broken English that he wanted to come in, saying,

“I want speak you. I must speak you. Now!”

I, of course, immediately invited him in and, not knowing what the other people in the house were doing or involved in, took him directly upstairs to my room.

My room contained nothing but a low mat upon which I slept and worked, my books and a number of plants as I try always to keep plants wherever I live unless I am simply travelling.

He sat down and, thinking to be polite, I asked him if he wanted coffee or tea — *qahwah* ‘*aw chai*.

“*Qahwah, chai, laysa muhim. ‘Ayz akalimik. ‘ala shay’in muhim. Muhim jiddan.*” “Coffee, tea not important. I want to speak with you about important things. Very important!”

Thus began one of the more profound relationships in my life.

The first thing he wanted me to understand was that the reason the interview had turned out as it had was because the man who had been translating was not really translating exactly what he had said (how precisely he knew this I didn’t ask) and

so he had decided that there was no point in continuing and had simply fed us formal answers hoping that I would get the idea (which I had) and pack it up. Which I had.

By this time I had two dictionaries out and we began picking our way through the minefields of mutual incomprehensibility.

The oddest thing was that I felt each time he spoke that I actually understood everything he was saying and it was only a question of a minute adjustment of some filter and I would understand everything perfectly. Rather like a radio that is just slightly off the beam of transmission but if you tune it a bit one way or the other the station would come in clear.

He also seemed to understand what I was saying and from that point on we began talking and went on talking every night over a period of time which seemed to me then, and now, as though we had been talking forever.

The first thing he said after we first tuned in to one another and actually entered into communication was,

“Ask me anything you want. I have all the answers. And if *I* don’t have the answer I will find the answer for you.”

I must have looked incredulous, for he immediately said,

“Islām contains all the answers. It is a science (*‘ilm*) that is so wide, so deep, so vast that you cannot encompass it. It is an ocean without a shore whose depths are without a bottom. It is a sky that no matter how high you fly you cannot go higher and if you do reach the edge of one sky you will fly into another sky. Seven skies and another one beyond those seven.”

“You have looked everywhere. You have spoken to everyone. Yet you do not know and you have no answer. How long do you want to live without an answer? How far must you travel; to how many lands must you go until you find what you seek?

“There is no need for all this travel. There is no need to continue asking here and there of this one and that one. What you seek is here and was always here waiting for you.

“Now you have arrived. Can you accept that you have arrived? Can you accept that there is an answer to your question and that, indeed, there are answers to all your questions?

“Or, will you turn around and run backwards? Do you not know that there is no back to which you can go? I know that already you know. Can you face that? Can you give up and accept that you have finally reached your destination which is, in truth, only the very beginning of your road?

“If you can, then let us begin. If you can’t, then say the word and I will be gone. But if I go another will come. Tomorrow or a year from now or ten years from now. It doesn’t matter. You must always reach this same point. The only question is, ‘will you go beyond?’ Will you step across the threshold now?

“Don’t you know that I have been waiting for you? I knew that you would come. Sooner or later. And now you have come. We have reached each other over so many miles and through so much time. I have known you from the beginning just as you have always known me.

“We are not two but we are one. One for one. One in one.

“I am your door. Walk through me or die in ignorance.”

And so it began.

My room, the disused utility kitchen, was not lit by electricity as I had for many years preferred a softer light than that which emanates from incandescent tungsten. Beyond the Damascus Gate in the bazaar of *Bābu-s-Saghīrah* I had managed to find some kerosene lamps and one of those lamps lit my room.

But as he spoke I sensed that another light filled the room. An ineffable invisible light and it was by this light that I saw him. *Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*. And in truth I saw him not with my eyes but with my heart and thus I stepped across.

We settled down facing each other on the mat below the window which held the night, and looking into his eyes I began asking my questions and receiving my answers.

My first question was the one that had been never far from my mind or heart since I had met al-Ḥusayn in India what seemed like so many years before. (N.B.: I have yet to tell this story)

Sharī‘ah — *Tarīqah*. Where lies the answer?

“*Ḥaqīqah*” was his immediate reply.

“How so?”

“The *Ḥaqīqah* is the very heart of the matter.

“We could say, if only by way of metaphor, that the body represents the *Sharīʿah* and the heart represents the *Tarīqah* and the *Ḥaqīqah* is that which resides in the core of the heart and as such it is the Throne of the Compassionate (*ʿarshu-r-rahmān*), as according to *ḥadithu-l-qudsiyyah* which is Allāh speaking on the tongue of the Prophet, blessings of Allāh and peace be upon him, ‘Nothing in the universe is capable of containing me except the heart of the believer (*al-muʿmin*)’.

“Thus at the very heart of the heart dwells Reality or *Ḥaqīqah*.

“The *Sharīʿah* is the form without which there is no existence.

“The *Tarīqah* is the Way that keeps the form alive.

“The *Ḥaqīqah* is the source of the life of the form.

“The body cannot live without a heart. The heart would not exist without there being a body in which it might dwell and neither of them could or would exist without the Reality which is the source of all life and being.

“There are many other metaphors which might serve to illustrate the relationship, such as the almond, the shell of which is the *Sharīʿah* the kernel of which is the *Tarīqah* and the oil of which is the *Ḥaqīqah*. Or the rose, the roots, stem and thorns of which are the *Sharīʿah*, the flower of which is the *Tarīqah* and the pure scent of which is the *Ḥaqīqah*, but I prefer the first for it is more to the point and easily understood.

“What is central to the whole issue is the inter-relatedness of all the elements contained in the equation and the necessity that they all be both present and functional both in the community, or the *ʿummah* as we call it, and in the individual, or the *ʿabd*, which is to say the worshipper of Allāh, the servant of Allāh and the slave of Allāh. The *ʿAbdu-Llāh*.

“The *Sharīʿah* alone provides the foundation on which a spiritual life can be built. Without it there is no stability whatsoever. It is like the glass which protects the flame of the lamp. Without this glass the flame, which gives the light, would be blown by every wind and from every quarter.

“When you look upon it from outside you may see it just as a mere form, indeed you might even imagine it to be an obstacle, something in the way between you and the light. But seen from the inside it is a protection, it is safety and safeguard for were it not to exist the light might be easily snuffed out.

“The *Shari‘ah* is a great gift of Allāh by means of which both the *‘abd* and the *‘ummah*, the individual worshipper and the community of worshippers, are safely guided, guarded and protected. It is the matrix or web which links all things together and which links the individual and the community to Allāh by sanctifying, clarifying, and purifying every aspect of life.

“The *Shari‘ah* is both contained in the Revelation, which is to say the Qur’ān, and is itself a Revelation which is ongoing and continuous in so far as it is put into practice (*sunnah*).

“Take for example the prayer, the *ṣalah* that we, as humans, individuals and members of a community have been ordered, and I emphasise the word, *ordered* to perform.

“At first glance, and again from the outside, this might appear to be an imposition; a burden. From the inside I can assure you it that it is neither, but let us leave that aside for a minute to look at both the command and the act itself.

“In the Final Revelation, which is the Qur’ān, Allāh has in a number of places, and over a period of time, ordered that the self-surrendered ones, the Muslims, must observe the *ṣalah* at least five times daily. Now that you have been staying here in the Holy Land with us for a while you have probably had the opportunity to see people at prayer both in groups (*jam‘ah*) and individually. Have you not?

“Yes” I replied, “I have and it has impressed me deeply,” and I told him what happened in the house of my landlord.

“Good, Now leaving aside, for a moment, how we even know what to do in the *ṣalāh*, what to say, what the exact form is and the exact words. Have you seen the people move through all the different postures and actions of standing, bowing, bending, prostrating, kneeling and giving salām right and left?”

Again I replied in the affirmative.

“In doing this they adhere to the *Shari‘ah* and they thus fulfil the commands of the God. Now imagine, since you have seen the people in their prayer, that there are two men standing next to each other. Let us say that one of them is a very simple man without much knowledge (*‘ilm*) or inner spiritual awareness and the other man is a highly conscious friend (*wali*) of Allāh. Both are fulfilling the order of Allāh but one of them stops at that and the other one is transported on wings of bliss. In both of their cases *you* simply see two men, in a line of other men, going up and down; placing their heads on the earth.

“Every action ordained by the God and thus contained within the framework of the *Shari‘ah* is like that. At the simplest level the one performing the action, be it prayer or the fasting or the paying the poor due or the pilgrimage, is simply and faithfully carrying out the orders of Allāh according to his degree and capacity. The very same action performed by another person with a greater capacity or degree is capable of yielding untold levels of both understanding and spiritual experience.

“And you must be mindful that I am only mentioning at first the obvious ritual or liturgical actions that are directly ordered by Allāh. These of course constitute the most visible, at least to an outsider, aspects of the *Shari‘ah*. The *Shari‘ah* however is far, far more than what you can casually see. It directly touches every aspect of the life of a human being, man or woman, from the new born to the dead and on both sides of birth and death.

“It deals with every aspect of life and death. It deals with simple things, which are nevertheless also profound if you can see deeply into them, like which hand you eat with and which hand you wipe your bottom with when you go to the toilet. It deals with very complex, and again very deep, issues like inheritance, marriage, divorce, politics, warfare and, and, and. It also deals with the full daily round of events like buying and selling in the market, one’s relationships with one’s neighbours, one’s relationships with people of the opposite sex or of different age or with people of different religions.

“In short there is no aspect of life that is not touched by the *Shari‘ah* and what this really means is that there is no aspect of life which is outside the ambit of Allāh ﷻ; no aspect of life

untouched by the order of Allāh. For Muslims there is no question of giving something to Caesar and something else to Allāh. Everything inherently belongs to and comes from Allāh, for from Whom else do we get our life and from Whom else do we get our daily bread and to Whom shall we all finally return?

“Thus when one lives in accord with the *Shari‘ah* one is actually living in accord with the direct Will of God.

“By adhering to this *Shari‘ah* one establishes harmony in one’s life and simultaneously one lives one’s life within a matrix of an essential integral unity which we call *Tawhīd*.

“It is also important to realise that, unlike the various laws made by man which are subject to change from time to time and from place to place, nothing in the *Shari‘ah* ever changes as it is a reflection and an emanation of the Divine Will, both eternal and transcendent. It is what it is, no more and no less, and knowledge of this coupled with adherence to it in turn gives rise to continuity, certitude and stability within one’s life.

“Harmony, unity, continuity, certitude and stability. All of these are absolute prerequisites for the spiritual life as well as for an ordered worldly life, individual and collective. These are some, and only some, of the facets of the *Shari‘ah*: the glass that surrounds and protects the light from the vicissitudes of the world. The glass itself, at least insofar as it is manifest, is principally composed of, or made of, three things: knowledge (*al-‘ilm*), action (*al-‘amal*) and true sincerity (*al-‘ikhlās*).

“Now the *Tariqah* is not, whatever you may have read or heard, something other; a kind of a road leading someplace else. It is rather the true internal dimension of the *Shari‘ah*.

“Again by way of metaphor. If you look at the sea you perceive the surface of it only. However if you were to swim in it and dive beneath it you would know that the sea is not only the surface you see but has depth. Such is the *Tariqah*.

“Now look at me and what do you see?”

I looked at him sitting before me on the mat and saw a man dressed in a rather conservative, if not severe, black robe with a neatly wound and very formal white turban wrapping round a

red felt *tarboosh* atop his head. As I looked at him he started to unbutton his outer robe and I saw that underneath he was wearing the old soft flanel robe, carefully darned and neatly patched, that he had on at home and taking off his turban he was wearing the same simple knit cap I had seen earlier.

“Thus it is, Sīdī, and thus am I both inner and outer, exoteric and esoteric, *ḍḥāhir* and *bāṭin*. One and the same.”

This was the first time he had addressed me by this term which is the polite term that the Ṣūfis use to address one another.

“You see in front of you a man of *Sharīʿah* and a man of *Tarīqah* and, *ʾinṣhāʾllāh*, a man of *Ḥaqīqah* as well.”

He then began talking a little about his life in the course of which I found that he had, after completing his studies at the College of *Sharīʿah*, been completely overpowered by a very deep spiritual state (*ḥal*) that had lasted for many years, in the course of which he had lived as a *faqīr* with no home other than the tomb of one of the friends of Allāh (*awliyāʾ Allāh*) in the Old City. Gradually this state had lifted and finally disappeared and he had taken up what would have been the normal duties of a graduate of the College of *Sharīʿah* in the law courts until finally he had become a judge. Whilst he carried out these duties with utmost gravity and sobriety at the same time he was deeply intoxicated in the spiritual sense and was living in a state of great bliss and enjoying many ecstatic experiences. He told me this, he said, not to impress me, but only so that I could actually see that both the state of complete sobriety and the state of complete ecstasy could and did exist at the same time and in the very same frame.

“It is very important that you understand that I am not talking about something theoretical; that I am not talking about something that I know only by hearsay or about something that I have merely read about. I am talking to you about what is real and I myself am the proof of its reality.

“As you have sought to find an answer to your question, you should know that I am the answer to your question, and that what you see before you is it. You will never find the answer elsewhere than right here and right now.

“You may not accept this answer but then you will find your self some years from now in a different place, in a different time you will meet me again, though of course everything, including me, will be subtly changed and not quite the same.

“In every life the door opens only now and then. When it is open you must step through, for you do not know when or where it will be open again but only *‘inshāā’ Allāh*, that it will, unless it be that degeneration or death intervene.”

Sitting looking at Shaykh Muḥammad something like that went through my heart and mind. “Here it is. This is it. He is sitting here and I am sitting here and he is telling me he knows the answers and all I have to do is ask. Not even ask. All I have to do is accept what he is offering.”

At the same time there was a tremendous resistance within me. “This is the end. If you take what this man is offering you will never be free again. He is going to plunge you into a hole from which you will never get out. You have met people. So many people. So many holy men and women all over the world but always you could see through them or at least see beyond them. You will never see the end of this. You will and can never fully encompass what this man is saying. Never. Never.”

The words, “Yā Sīdī.” came unbidden to my lips. “What you say is true. I know I can feel it in all of my heart and my mind but I must confess that I am afraid. Deeply afraid.”

“Beloved (*ḥabībī*) there is nothing to fear. You ask. I answer. When you have enough answers then you decide. Be easy. This moment will not end until you are satisfied one way or the other. Shall we begin or shall I leave? It is as you like.”

“Yā Sīdī, let us begin now.”

Thus began a process that went on for many months at least in the realm of gross time and for many centuries or seconds in another realm of time. Sometimes we would talk from after the night prayer until the first call for the dawn prayer. Sometimes there were other people present with their questions and sometimes we were alone. In truth it didn’t really matter to me one way or the other as for the first time I was with some one who I believed really had the answers to my questions.

A month or two later Ṣhaykh Muḥammad told us that he would like to bring a guest to our house. A guest who was a Ṣhaykh from Amman in Jordan and not only him alone but thirty or forty of his students who would accompany him.

I, of course, was pleased by this and said, “Of course, but I will not be coming back from interviews until late in the afternoon”, to which he replied that he would arrange everything with the people of the house.

When I returned I found the house in a mild uproar. Obviously the Ṣhaykh had been on to everybody and the house was in the last stages of being cleaned with water coming under the door. Entering I was pleased to smell *bukḥūr*, a local preparation made of frankincense, gum arabic, some other resins of whose name I wasn’t sure and a few shavings from the rare ‘*ud* tree of Ḥadrahmawt, which was burning on coals in the little clay pots made for that purpose and sold everywhere in the souk.

The house was absolutely spotless and, I noticed, the women who worked with us doing interviews and transcribing tapes all had their heads covered with scarves (*hijāb*), even those who usually resisted such attire. I went upstairs and found the men, along with a few guests from friends we had made during our stay, sitting in the room we used for large meetings.

Since the Ṣhaykh liked to use this room for prayer we had painted on the appropriate wall an arched door-like shape which marked the qiblah or the direction of prayer. At the far end of the room directly opposite to the qiblah there were some cushions so that Ṣhaykh Muḥammad and his guest could sit facing the qiblah, as we knew he preferred always, if possible, to sit facing in the direction of the Ancient House in Makkah.

There wasn’t much conversation and what there was seemed to be unusually subdued, or perhaps not subdued, but low key. Everybody was expectant. I found myself to be so as well.

I had not been seated but for a few minutes when there came the hooting of car klaxons at our gate. One window in the room looked down on the gate and I saw a number of the vans which are used for long haul taxis plus a white Peugeot 505 station-wagon had pulled up outside our gate.

I went down with Laṭīf, one of the men with whom I worked, who had by far the best Arabic, and began to throw open wide the gates so that the cars might come right into the courtyard. “No need, no need. We can park by the wall. Leave them be.” I left off and then one by one and, sometimes, two by two a large crowd of men, mainly in their twenties and thirties, all dressed in simple white garments and wearing white skull caps came through the small door in the big green gate. As they entered the courtyard they stood to the right of the gate along the wall where the white, night blooming, yasmīn was planted. “White on white.” I thought, for behind them, no doubt due to the streak of warm weather we had the few days past, the yasmīn bloomed against the stone walls.

At the end of what now had taken on the appearance of a procession came Ṣhaykḥ Muḥammad in his usual black robes and always spotless white wound turban arm in arm with a very shiny man attired in a plain white robe and crocheted white skull cap. After giving their salām he said, “This is Sīdī Ṣhaykḥ, my brother, Ḥāzim ʿAbū Ghazālāh of the Ṭarīqah al-Hāshamiyyah-Ṣhādhḥuliyah who is on one of his regular tours (*jawlah*) and meeting with the brothers in many different places. When I told him of you and the group here he expressed his interest in visiting with you and all the group.”


This was put in a rather formal manner or, at least, certainly more formal than Ṣhaykḥ Muḥammad usually was in addressing me but, looking at the men accompanying Ṣhaykḥ Ḥāzim and the manner in which they were turned out, I supposed that he was the Ṣhaykḥ of a large *ṭarīqah* and used to a certain kind of deference and formality.

Rapidly shifting gears out of the more *darwishy* mode that I had become accustomed to with Ṣhaykḥ Muḥammad, and sensing that he would appreciate my being on my best manners, I spoke a welcome to the Ṣhaykḥ and said what I hoped were all the right things even though I felt a bit stiff and awkward in the process.

It did not, I thought, bode well for the evening which had shifted in my mind from what I had hoped would be a night of ecstasy to a night somehow like the meeting I had a few years

earlier with some of the Western *fuqarā'* of the Ḥabībīyyah in Berkeley. Goodwilled enough but formal, studied and stiff.

I confess that suddenly I was not looking forward to the evening and was thinking how much more I preferred the circle of the grandfather in al-Kḥalīl, where everybody showed up in their work clothes and then sailed off on a cloud of bliss.

Somehow I felt organised Ṣūfism was a bit of a contradiction in terms. Even today, some forty years on and, in general, somewhat more sober (*ṣahw*), I will reach a line in the Qur'ān and be so seized by its ramifications and meanings that I can't continue in my reading even in the midst of leading the prayer. I have a tendency toward intoxication (*sukr*) and the love of ecstasy but I have become more able to contain it due to the teaching of my Shaykh  who teaches that the man of *ḥāl* is like a river that runs over its banks whereas the man of *maqām* is like an ocean whose banks never overflow. Slowly I am becoming more like an ocean through his example.

In any case then was then, and now I showed the two Shaykhs in along with the thirty or forty white robed and *kufi* capped men and soon we were all seated in the big upper room above the garden with the smell of the *yasmīn* coming in the window.

Tea was brought in large pots which we had borrowed from the neighbours but Shaykh Ḥazim said we would pray first and then drink tea so there was a scurry up and down and even into the garden where there was a tap and soon enough we were all lined up in rows and Shaykh Muḥammad led the prayers.

As we had by then followed Shaykh Muḥammad, who believed in learning by doing, on a number of occasions in the prayer there were no gaffes or awkward moments about who was or wasn't a Muslim, as many of us were sorting that question out at the time. I suppose he had said nothing to Shaykh Ḥazim about our curious 'state' or 'condition' which was not exactly your usual West Bank Muslim household.

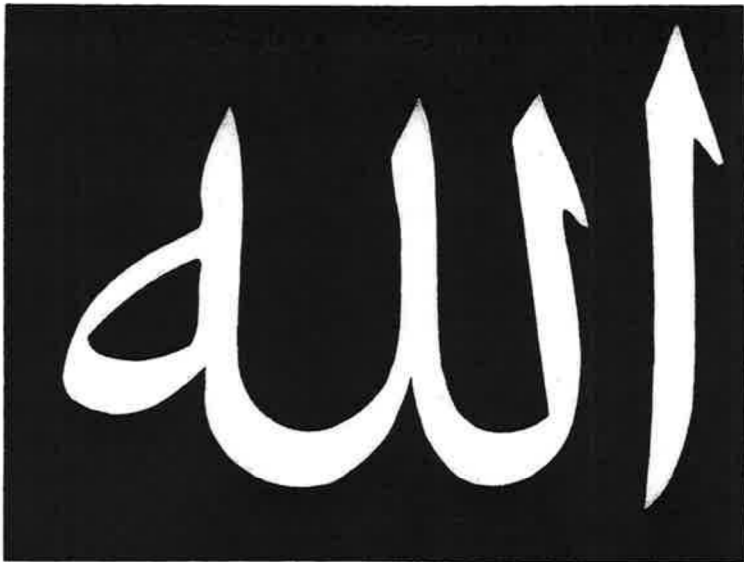
After the *ṣalāh* we all recited the usual, by now, thirty three *subḥanullāh*(s), *alḥamduli-llāh*(s) and *allāhu 'akbar*(s) that comprise the *sunnah* after *ṣalah* and then, ranged in a wide circle, with some people in the corners, we all sat to drink tea.

As I had thought, Shaykh Ḥazim and Shaykh Muḥammad sat together at the end of the room facing the qiblah and Shaykh Muḥammad invited me to come to sit beside him, which I did.

Tea complete and all the glasses collected, Shaykh Ḥazim requested Shaykh Muḥammad to recite some Qurʾān both out of politeness but, even more so, because Shaykh Muḥammad was very widely regarded and well known as an inspired reciter (*qāriʿ*) of Qurʾān and I believe, had in the past, been for a while one of the reciters at the Masjid of al-ʿAqṣā.

His recital was, indeed, inspired and punctuated by *takbīr* and exclamation of the Name of Allāh as he would complete one āyat or another. Then he read the entire Sūratu-r-Raḥmān, (The Universally Merciful) which, after the Basmallah, begins,

The Universally Merciful Who taught the Qurʾān
Who created the human being and taught the Clear Meaning.



When he reached the ending and had said the closing '*ṣaḍaqa-llāhu-l-aḍḥīm*' and called for the Fātiḥah to be recited, Shaykh Ḥazim motioned to one of the older men in his group who, on his signal, began distributing small cards sealed in clear plastic on which was written the Divine Name: Allāh ﷻ.

After all these years I still have that card and carry it with me wherever I go. It is reproduced on the preceding page.



Upon another almost imperceptible signal from the Shaykh, the men who had been sitting in the corners of the room just outside the circle completely re-arranged us so that we were now sitting in long parallel lines instead of a circle. Each man sat facing another man and each man held the card face outward in the centre of the body just at the level of the heart and thus easily visible to the man directly opposite.

I then heard a sound I don't think I ever heard before. The closest I can recall to anything even remotely like it was when I was child standing next to a huge steam locomotive and it began to move except this was an 'in' breath instead of an 'out' breath. And just as it had come 'in' so it came out in one long āāāāāāāāāāāāh completely without any effort or strain,

Then it began again only this time everyone in the room went

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

and out again

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

and in again

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

and out again

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

and in again

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rising

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

falling

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

and in and

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

out

then, on another signal from the Shāykh, and mind you I saw none of these signals but rather just subliminally felt them and found myself in the next mode, we all stood up in unison and formed one large circle, again with some of the men standing in the corners. The lights were all turned off.

Now in the circle we took each other hand in hand and began

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

and again

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

and again

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

rising

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

falling

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

in

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

and out

The pace never varied nor did the pitch. As we stood, hand in hand, in the circle the men in the four corners began to ‘chant’.

I have heard all kinds of chanting from my earliest days in the church, as well as the most sublime and exalted of all kinds of *sutras*, *bajans*, *qawwali* and *qasāid* but never did I experience anything even remotely like what I experienced that night.

Every once in a while it seemed that the circle became smaller and once I opened my eyes and I saw that men had ‘fallen out’ and the monitors in the corners it seemed also had the function of moving them and propping them up against the walls of the room. Another curious thing I noticed when I opened my eyes was that not only was the glass in the window that looked out over the garden to the gate fogged over thus turning the light that came in from the incandescent lamp in the street below into a kind of multi-circled halo but that the walls seemed to have moss growing all over them. They were distinctly green.

I continued with my eyes open and saw that in the centre of the circle which was empty there was a glowing green light like sunlight through leaves, modulated and soft, and very green. In fact, as I watched, the whole room seemed suffused with this same very soft, but intense, green light.

I was unable to keep my eyes open and closed them again and still the slow and careful in breaths and out breaths continued

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

and in and

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

out

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

rising

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh

and falling and

still the men in the four corners continued the *qaṣīdah*.

I cannot say what took place for I left this world and was taken to another. It was like one of those late 50's or early 60's dynamo cars that just kept smoothly accelerating. On and on.

Effortless and smooth and all the power you could ever want that went on and on eating up the road and gliding round the corners, not that I was on any road that I can ever recall being on before. This was the highway of the heavens and was definitely beyond the blue horizon — way, way beyond.

It was a paean of pure praise that had neither beginning nor end and could and would go and indeed it was going on for ever and ever and ever; worlds without end.

At some point there was a 'shift' in the *qaṣīdah* coming from the four corners and then there was one very long final

āāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāāh.

And the Ṣhaykḥ, still standing, called out, “

al-fāāāātīḥah.



We sat again in the circle and tea was brought in — sweet and very milky with cardamom and sage in it.

Nothing was said. The tea was finished and Shaykh Ḥazim got up with Shaykh Muḥammad at his side and they walked out.

Just like that.

And all the white robed men followed them. I was so stunned that I could barely move but somehow I got to my feet and down the stairs and out into the garden and out the gate where I found Shaykh Ḥazim standing by his car.

It was quite cool, even almost cold. The Shaykh had on a long overcoat over his robes. He smiled at me and said in Arabic which was immediately translated into English,

“*Hal turīd ‘an tati ma’y*” or “Want to come along with me?”

I just looked at him speechless. I was, at that moment at least beyond ever wanting anything again.

“If you’re coming, come on,” looking at Shaykh Muḥammad who was standing beside him and smiling, “or shall I leave you for my brother, Sidī Muḥammad?”

I remained speechless. I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was gaze on him, though I feel sure my heart communicated the love and tenderness I felt at that moment.

Then, in the Ṣūfī manner in which each brother raises the hand of the other to his lips and kisses it, he kissed the hand of Shaykh Muḥammad and then we were kissing each others’ hand and then he was moving around the car and into the front passenger’s seat and, just like that, he pulled out with his caravan behind him. It was three o’clock in the morning and I never saw him again from that day to this though I keep his ‘card’ always with me and the small book of *qaṣā’id* and *ʿawrād* he presented me with, handing it out the car window as they pulled out and set off for their next Holy Land ‘stop’.

More than that, he has never left my heart from that day to this.

Shaykh Muḥammad and I then kissed hands and he turned and walked up the hill and into the night and that was *dhāt* and is.



So my dear reader, we have come a long way. I thank you for staying with me as long as you have. There is just a bit more to go and this tale will, *ʿinshāʾ Allāh*, be told and you can put this little book away though I trust and pray some of some of what I say will find its way into your heart or mind or both.



Fast forward some fifteen or so years.

In the interim period I had returned to America and then, unable to stay there had gone to Makkah to make Ḥajj and wound up studying at the old *Markaz al-Lughati-l-ʿArabiya* or Arabic Language Center which was attached to the *Shariʿah* College in Makkah. After three and a half years I left Makkah and went to study in Cairo and finally had returned to America where I once again founded an ʿIslāmic Study Center with a school for children in the southwestern part of the United States.

In the course of my studies in Cairo I met many of the *ʿawliyāʾ* of Allah among whom was Dr. Shaykh ʿIbrāhīm Muḥammad al-Baṭawī Abu Ḍḥikrī, a Professor of Islamic Studies at al-Azhar University who specialised in the teaching and study of Shaykh Abu Ḥamid al-Ghazālī ؒ with particular emphasis on the *ʿIhya ʿUlūmu-d-Dīn* to foreign students.

I often attended the *ḥadrah* in his *zawiya* on Azhar Street near the Masjid of Sayyidina al-Ḥusayn ؑ and benefited from his teaching and the teachings I received from many other *shuyukḥ* of *Shariʿah*, *Tariqah* and *Ḥaqiqah* in *ʿUmmu-d-Dunya* (Cairo).

In the course of our work with the Islamic Study Center and the Islamic School for children, we often brought teachers from different parts of the world either to teach or to help us in our work on preparing Islamic curricula in English language.

One day I received a phone call from an old friend in Cairo who told me that Shaykh ʿIbrāhīm was going to be visiting America and wondered if we would receive him at the Center.

I should mention here that during my stay in the Holy Land I had given my *bayʿah* (initiatatory oath) to the Grandfather ؒ and been received as a student (*murīd*) in the *Shādhḍhuli* school. I would have done so with Shaykh Muḥammad, but at

that time he had not yet received permission (ʿidhīn) from his own shaykh, Sidi Shaykh Muḥammad Hāshim ad-Darqawī at-Tilminsāni ؒ in Damascus to accept the bayʿah.

In the course of the fifteen years or so that had elapsed my own shaykh, the Grandfather, had left this world and I found myself an orphan without a shaykh and very much worried by this as I always remembered the saying, “Who does not have a shaykh has Shaytān for a shaykh.”

But there was nothing to do but to wait and see what Allāh ﷻ would make for me, as I knew enough by then not to go looking for something or someone but to wait for whomever Allāh would send. This is in accord with the principle enunciated by the Shādhḍhuli shaykh and Māliki ʿalim, Shaykh Ibn ʿAṭāʾillāh as-Sakandari ؒ in his work, *at-Tanwīr fī ʿIsqāṭ-i-Tadbīrāt* (Light on the Cessation of Self-Direction) which is based on what Allāh the Glorified and Exalted has said:

“But no, by your Lord, they will not (really) believe, until they make you (their) judge in all disputes between them, and (until they) find in themselves no resistance to your decisions, and submit (themselves) with the fullest submission.” (Q4:65)

“And your Lord creates what He wills and chooses. The choice is not up to them. Exalted is Allāh and high above anything they associate with Him!” (Q28:68)

“Or shall people have anything they fancy even though the Last and the First belong to Allāh?” (Q53:24-25)

And the ḥadīth of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, who said:

“Indeed, he has tasted the sweetness of secured faith (ʿimān) who is pleased with Allāh ﷻ as his Lord, and with the Way of Submission (ʿislām) as his religion, and with Muhammad ﷺ as his Prophet.”

And also in his ﷺ saying, “Adore Allāh with contentment, but if you are unable to, then in patience; with what you dislike is great good indeed!”

Indeed there are many other such sayings of Allāh ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ that point to the abandonment of self direction

(*tadbīr*) and contesting the Divine decrees of fate; either in the form of a plain statement, or as a subtle indication.

The people of divine gnosis have said: "Whoever does not plan for himself is planned for (by Allāh)." And Sidi ʿAbu-l Ḥasan aṣḥ-Ṣhādhḍulī ﷺ has said: "If it is such that there is no other way of action than *tadbīr*, then plan not to plan (*dabbiru an la tudabbiru*)." He also said: "Make no choice upon your own authority in anything, and choose not to choose. Flee from that choice, from your flight, and from everything to Allāh, for your Lord creates what He wills and He exercises free choice."

In any case I told my friend in Cairo to give me the dates and times and I would make all the arrangements to go and receive the Ṣhaykh and bring him from the airport, which was some two hours to the south.

So it was that some days later I myself drove our immaculately restored two-tone brown and tan stretch Buick limo to pick the Ṣhaykh up from the airport.

I should digress to say a word here about this car. It was what they call in America, "cherry". Since we often went to pick up guests from abroad at the airport and since they had often travelled for many many hours, sometimes from the Mid-East and some-times from even further afield we had invested in this really "luxe", if a bit flashy, car so that our guests would be comfortable and, if they wanted, they could relax or even sleep. On top of that it was really, as I said, huge so that it could easily accomodate all the luggage of our many guests.

The Ṣhaykh, on the other hand, was five foot two and very slight, though quite strong, and the very opposite of flashy. He was as he said, "Just a farm boy from Munifiyyah" which is a province in the Nile Delta devoted mainly to agriculture.

When I had collected his baggage and brought him out of the airport and showed him to the car he stopped and, glancing at the vast Buick, asked who else were we going to pick up. When I told him, "No one but you," he was seemed surprised and asked, "Couldn't you have come in a smaller car?"

Since his flight had gotten in late, I took him to a hotel which we always used for guests who had come a long way and again

it was the same story. The room, which was a suite, seemed absolutely enormous and he looked lost in it and asked if I wouldn't be staying with him?, "No", I said, "this all for you".

He then asked where I was going to stay and I told him at a small motel nearby where we often stayed and he told me.


"Cancel this room. I'll come and stay with you. I have no need of this huge room. Don't waste your money. It's not yours."

So we canceled the reservation and went to the motel and we prayed our Maghrib and 'Ishā together and went to sleep.

I woke in the night and saw him praying his *tahajjud* (middle of the night supererogatory prayer) and it was he, seemingly not at all jet-lagged, who woke me for the *fajr* (dawn) *ṣalāh*.

In the morning I took him to a nearby restaurant for breakfast but he was not happy with the menu or the smell of the place, which reeked of the bacon which Americans favor for breakfast. He asked me if there was not somewhere else we could eat and I told him that there was a Palestinian store nearby from which we used to buy ḥalāl (*dḥabiha*) meat as well as olives, feta cheese, *maryamiyah* and other Mid-Eastern foods.

He told me that would suit him better, so off we went and after finding him everything he liked and after a tasty and simple breakfast during which he had a long conversation in Arabic with the owner of the shop we got in the Buick for our trip north up the valley of the Rio Grande.

When I tried to put him in the back of the car where I thought he would be more comfortable he told me, "No! I'll ride up front with you and we'll talk as we go." which we did in a mixture of Arabic and English after he first recited some *du'ā*² and the *Invincible Citadel* of 'Imām al-Ghazali .

Soon we had come to the fork in the where the Chama river joins the Rio Grande and we turned northwest on two lane blacktop and he fell silent. I presumed that he was getting sleepy and that the jet-lag had crept up on him when he told me, "I'm not sleeping. I'm tired. I'm just being quiet."

Over the many years I have known him he always seems to be able to read my mind.

We went along for some twenty miles in silence, when he informed me, “Shaykh Ahmad al-Badawi رحمته الله is sitting in the back of the car.”

Shaykh Ahmad al-Badawi, who lived centuries ago in Tanta which is the city at the very heart of the Delta, is one of the great Mashāikh of Egypt. I knew from earlier conversations I had with the Shaykh in Egypt that his mother’s family had all been connected to the *Tariqatu-l-Badawiyyah*, but said nothing and continued driving up the Chama Valley.

Another ten miles passed and the shaykh told me, “Shaykh Abu’l Hasan ash-Shādhūli رحمته الله is sitting with Shaykh Ahmad in the back of the car. They are both very happy with you.”

This was turning out to be quite a drive but still I remained quiet and we continued until we finally reached our home where he was going to stay with us in the guestroom. I bade him wait in the car whilst I removed the luggage through the back of the house and then showed him to the garden gate which led to the front of the house in front of which, and under ancient green cottonwoods, an irrigation ditch flowed.

I went around to the back to get the luggage and came through the house so that I could open the front door and show him in.

As I walked through the house to the front door I saw him through one of the windows looking with the eyes of a farmer at the long soft green fields of alfalfa which stretched out from the banks of the irrigation ditch in front of our house.

I went to go to open the front door for him when I heard him knocking and then the door slowly opened and I saw his hand.

Dear reader I cannot really tell you what I saw when I saw his hand but in Truth it was not his hand nor any one else’s hand but rather it was the hand of the Blessed Prophet ﷺ that came in my door and all that I can tell you is that my time as an orphan had come to an end and I put my hand in his hand and “*the Hand of Allāh is above their hands.*” (Q48:10) and the days of my exile finally come to an end.

I had been lost and then I had been found and then lost and found again.

Alḥamdulillāh I have remained found and some twenty years have passed since then and I am still his student. In time he gave me *ʾijāza* to teach and made me his *kḥalifah* in the West.

All of this, in a sense, began some forty years ago when I first entered the Dargah of Ḥaẓrat Kḥwaja Nizāmuddīn ʿAwliyāʾ and so I am honored and blessed to have received an invitation from Ḥaẓrat Kḥwaja Ghulam Quṭbuddīn Farīdī to come to Lahore to give a talk on the occasion of the Annual Jalsa held in honour of Ḥaẓrat Kḥwaja Nizāmuddīn ʿAwliyāʾ and Ḥaẓrat Kḥwaja Muḥammad Yar Farīdī, Allāh sanctify their secret, who, following the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ sent by Allāh as a mercy (*rahmah*) to all humanity, sought in turn to further that message of peace, justice, mercy and love for all.



I would like to ask a further indulgence from the reader; that you read just a bit further to see what ties this all together.

Three years ago in 1424 Hijri (2003 ce) I was invited by my old friend Shāykh Muḥammad to visit a new Center that he had founded in California in order to assist him in teaching some of his students how to read, write and recite Qurʾānic Arabic.

By then I was living in Virginia about thirty miles from where my father had grown up more than, by then, a century before.

We had flown in seven hours plus or minus from Washington, DC to Oakland, California and were picked up by the person in charge of receiving guest teachers as, I had myself been so many years earlier.

As they say, “What goes round, comes round.”

In any case our plane arrived late in the day after one of those amazing flights through achingly blue skies amidst castles and mountains of clouds and the whole of America, or at least that East/West path of it, had passed beneath our wings until we had come down over the still snow-capped Sierra Nevadas, across the Central Valley, and finally over San Fransico Bay through a blazing yellow, pink and gold shot orange sunset just as the lights of the cities were twinkling on and the freeways became illuminated flowing rivers of the homeward bound.

We were thankful to be on the ground but tired and hungry and we asked the person who came to get us if we might find a *ḥalāl* restaurant somewhere nearby before we drove up to the center which was a couple of hours further north.

I was assured that there were many such *ḥalāl* restaurants in Berkeley, the next city up the Bay from Oakland.

Later we found ourselves in Berkeley on University Avenue but, what in the time it had taken to claim our baggage and get to one of the satellite parking lots, the evening had advanced and most of the restaurants were now closed or were closing.

Finally we saw one with a big green neon *ḥalāl* sign in Arabic and we went in, but something was strange — by the cash register there was a statue of the elephant Ganesh.

“Well that is odd,” I thought to myself.” but I didn’t see any alcohol for sale (a friend of mine once told me you could never trust a restaurant to be *ḥalāl* if there was something *haram* for sale) and when I asked the person behind the register they assured me that the meat was definitely *ḥalāl* (*dḥabiha*) and that, although they were Hindus, most of their customers in that neighborhood were Muslim and, “business is business” and, besides, they didn’t “do” cow, only lamb, sheep and goat.

Since everything else was closed and we had a long two hours in the car before we would reach the Center I decided, not having eaten, that I better eat. Even so I felt a bit odd eating in the company of Ganesh; but noting the weather was mild and there were some tables outside on the sidewalk I elected to take my dinner outside in order to avoid the *murti* within.

The dinner was delicious, the *chapatis* were both light and just right, the service great, the host was genial, and the spicy *chai* exactly hit the spot after a day of bland airplane beverages.

After we finished our dinner our host came out and asked if we would like a really special desert whereupon he went back into his restaurant and brought out some little sweets wrapped in white paper. These were *tabbarūk* he told us from the Dargah of Khawja Nizamuddin ‘Awliyā’. He had just returned from Dehli where he visited ‘the great Saint’ at the time of his *‘urs* and brought these *nukḥal* back for his ‘very special’ customers.

And now just one more thing and I'll be done.

For many years in my library I have kept two very special books that were written by one Mirza W. D. Begg. The first is, *The Holy Biography of Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Mu'innuddin Chishtī of Ajmer* and the second, by the same author is, *The Big Five of India in Sufism* which contains the holy biographies (*tabaqāt*) of Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Quṭubuddīn, Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Fariduddīn, Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Alla'uddīn, Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Nizamuddīn and Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Naṣiruddīn, published under the banner headline, "Love Towards All — Malice Towards None".

I have read these inspiring books many times over the years but in the past ten years, when most of my time was devoted to the translation and transliteration of the Qur'ān, I have not been reading much other than Qur'ān, Tafsīr and Du'āā'.

Last autumn, however, I felt a very strong pull to pick up the *The Big Five of India in Sufism* and was very drawn to read once again of the section about Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Nizamuddīn as I have always felt very strongly connected to him for in Truth, it was through that visit to him some forty years ago that I came into contact with 'Islām and Ṣūfism which is at its heart.

I mentioned this to a dear friend of mine from India and is familiar with the Holy Saint and my friend, after asking me when I felt this attraction (*jadhb*), informed me that this *jadhb* came just at the time of *Urs* of Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Nizamuddīn.

A few months later there came an invitation from Ḥaẓrat Khwaja Ghulam Quṭubuddīn Farīdī to come to Lahore and now, here I am, so I trust that is all as clear to you as it is to me.



Praise be to Allāh who, through His Eternal Word, does not cease to be praised: The Universally Merciful, The Singularly Compassionate, Who by His Vast Mercy has stirred up in us gratitude for His goodness wherewith He has enriched us and inspired us to praise and glorify Him.

Dear reader all that is beneficial in what you have read is from the favour of Allāh. Anything else is my mistake for which I ask the forgiveness of Allāh and His Messenger ﷺ.



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